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ABSTRACT

The creation and building of an interpersonal communication course varies with the course content and format, the instructor, and the students. Although such courses have changed over the past 10 years and will continue to change, there are five points of emphasis in which these variables figure. The first point or rule is that the course must successfully blend theory and applications, or experience. There is a great body of research literature and a wealth of activities, exercises, and experiences available to help teachers achieve this blend. Instructors are better trained than ever before, and students are more intelligent and curious. Rule 2 states that both in giving data and in developing understanding of the applications, teachers should leave room for students to fill in the gaps. Course content and format should include time for discussion, and the instructor may need to appear modest and fallible to motivate students to be attentive and assertive. According to rule 3, the interpersonal course must have a supportive climate to thrive. This means avoiding competitive situations in the classroom. "Do things" is rule number 4. Let the students get involved in activities, make mistakes, and learn from their errors. Finally, rule 5 states "discuss it, and get closure." Relate the activities to real life and draw longer range possibilities from the students as they predict how interpersonal exercises might affect their future communications. (HTH)

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CREATING AND BUILDING THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

(Texas Speech Communication Association Meeting)

October 1982

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If we follow our own teachings, then we will treat this subject as a changing, moving event, not a static one. In other words, the creation and the building of an Interpersonal Course may not be the same this year as it was ten years ago, nor may it be the same in Luling and Lubbock or Dallas and Dimmit. Who teaches it -- and to whom -- become other changing factors which make our generalizations a trifle shaky at best and downright misleading at worst.

To press on regardless, we will comment on past, present, and future Interpersonal Communication courses related to these three variables:

1. The course content and format, or the stuff interpersonal is made of;
2. The instructor, and the stuff he or she is made of; and
3. The students, who are the reason we are doing this.

We want to look at these variables in relation to five general principles, or call them five rules. We are overcoming our own objections to cook-book kinds of systems, by giving the five easy steps to . . . . . whatever. But to work effectively with the spiralling style of information delivery, we are marking five distinct points of emphasis.

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Let's start with some historical notes to make the point of Rule 1. The rule is: The course must successfully blend theory and applications, or experience. We predict that rule will be as important in the future as it is today, and as it has been in the past. Some anecdotal reminiscences, if you will bear with us.

Let us express a debt to a pioneer in interpersonal, Elwood Murray at the University of Denver. In the late 1930's when much of the speech area was just emerging from declamation as the highest form of human interaction, Elwood was writing and preaching "Integrative Speech" and wrote Speech Personality. By today's multivariate standards Elwood Murray was not a brilliant researcher; but he had a superb critical sense for spotlighting the salient issues in human communication and an uncanny ability for early locating people whose theories would one day make an impact on the field. His workshops at Denver were some of the most creative and innovative in the country largely because of that one important feature that he saw no dichotomy between theory and practice -- between research and methodology. To him there was no enormous gulf between the two -- no River Jordan to separate the analyzer from the do-er.

He collected to his Denver sessions scholars whose strengths lay in both theorizing and applying the theories -- Ray Birdwhistell at a time when his writings consisted of a University of Kentucky extension tract on kinesics; Alfred Korzybski, dynamically offending static thinkers with early general semantics; Don Hayakawa and his popularizing and interpreting of Korzybski's ponderous prose; Gregory Bateson, Irving Lee, Anatol Rapaport, and J.L. Moreno

when he was just beginning to influence the performance of psychodrama as well as writing about it. Murray was also a founding director of the National Society for the Study of Communication which grew into the International Communication Association -- Kenneth Harwood and Mickey Dover were part of that same thrust which encouraged how-to-do communication in conjunction with testing its hypotheses.

These name-droppings are intended to give you a picture of great people who have worked at theory and at application. We can do no less in our present teaching of Interpersonal Communication. There is a great body of research literature available to all of us to teach about and to teach from -- at the same time there is a wealth of activities, applications, exercises, games, and experiences to complete the complementary dimension in an effective Interpersonal course.

That is the content. Excellent and available. What about the other two variables -- the instructor and the student?

Instructors are better trained than ever before; they are coming from our best graduate schools with a tradition in preparing the rounded graduate. Journals keep us current; as do our attending conventions, seminars, short courses, conferences. When Elwood Murray was first gathering his disciples into this new sub-discipline, there were few other pockets of interest in the country. Today it is hard to find a region that does not have academic opportunity for the pursuit of Interpersonal as both theoretical and methodological study. Ten years ago the "help wanted" ads in our journals and in the Chronicle of Higher Education scarcely mentioned the field; and today there

are many listings of speech communication openings which specify interpersonal as one of the teaching responsibilities. Further, the universal assumption seems to be that the instructor will have background both in the research and in the applications of interpersonal as a content and as an activity.

Students as the third variable are perhaps the most exciting of all. Coming out of the sixties and seventies, when there was some aberrated system which gave credit for participating in sit-ins and riots, the student we see today is more cognitive and more curious. Students want to know how we know. Epistemology, phenomonology, heuristics, are not unknown terms as the students seek understanding of why they do what they are doing, uncovering principles involved with their own learning. Mindless hedonism expressed in inarticulate "y'knows" and slogans have begun to be replaced with career oriented analysis of their own futures. For all the criticism of modern student pragmatics, they do have a better balance between acting out their needs and exploring the underlying theories and systems which help them generalize experiences. Personal uncertainty which encouraged what has been pejoratively called "touchy-feely" approaches is broadening into an enlarged quest for relevance in the work society as well as the flower-filled fields.

Rule Number 2: Both in giving data and in developing understanding of the applications, leave room for students to fill in the gaps. Another way of saying this is: sometimes be purposefully obscure, confusing, ambiguous so the students must sort out ideas for themselves. Cruder still: don't spoonfeed the data, or give easy truths.

Course content and format should include, if at all possible, time for discussion. A simple technique to encourage student thinking is to resist answering questions asked, but to turn them back on the class . . "who has a comment on that idea?" or "I'd like a shot at that later, but do any of you want to answer the question?" Discussion becomes a class discussion, not just a progressive dialog between the instructor and one student after another serially sampling the professor's accumulated acumen.

The instructor, in this rule, has to have courage and confidence. Courage to appear uncertain, fallible, mortal, and modest. Confidence that resources exist among the students which can be tapped by deliberate withholding of wisdom from the instructor. The trade-off here is that the teacher may, for a while, appear muddleheaded and tentative, but the amount of learning by the students is greatly enlarged.

The students themselves in this rule must have curiosity about the material, must ask questions and contribute answers. They must be attentive and assertive. If your class has only one or two such responders, there is a danger of dominance by too few. Most of the class members must have or develop the quality of participation.

Which brings us to Rule Number 3: The Interpersonal Course must have a supportive climate to thrive.

Structuring content and format for support to students is simple. You avoid the normal competetive situations in class as much as you can; you let people comment on the good features of a presentation or exercise (and then ask for the negative criticisms from the subjects themselves rather than from the rest of the class).

As an instructor you model supportive behaviors. You praise cogent and insightful comments; you avoid put-downs. No student should ever be permitted to fail a performance; no oral presentations are so bad that there are not positive reinforcing comments that can be made. Do you mark exams by questions correct or questions missed?

Students who compete during examinations need not also compete during the regular class sessions. Groups are useful to encourage cooperation and helping habits; when possible students should be assigned to or get to select groups to work out cases, exercises, and activities rather than having to go it alone. Most students are honestly introspective, and are ready to admit their fears and failures to the rest of the class if they are just convinced that is the norm.

Now to Rule 4. Do things. Don't just tell them. Let them get their hands dirty, make some mistakes (which they will confess to if nobody is poised to pounce on errors), get their thumbs caught in the works, and get their foreheads sweaty and knees knocking. Involve them. For content there are so many sources of activities and experiences you probably already have a shelf-full.

As an instructor pick those which fit you. What games or exercises do you feel easy with? Which do you believe contribute to learning? Sometimes we feel embarassed with some "old chestnuts" experiences and feel we should update our material. We are all for trying new approaches; but if you have a favorite which really works --- really turns on student learning, go ahead and keep using it.

Students are becoming more sophisticated and more knowledgable about the exercises and games. Coming to our classes from the high schools are students who have seen the Ames Window, who have taken the Haney Inference Test. That may be an argument to keep fresh; and at least have activities which are at the students' levels of ability to perform and ability to learn from. They still have many fears and anxieties and no game should threaten or damage any student in your class. Every game must have an escape valve for the student who may be overly sensitive.

And that brings us to Rule 5.

Discuss it, and get closure. Take time to develop the implications and applications of the activity. Relate the game to real life. Draw longer range possibilities from the students as they predict how the exercise might affect their future communications. As a rule of thumb, we try to have at least as much time to process an exercise or experience as it takes to perform it.

The instructor should lead discussion to get closure and the questions might be: why did we do it? What did you learn from it? It is not unusual for these questions to be included on exams, asking for first a DESCRIPTION of what went on, and the IMPLICATIONS for communication.

Students generally are eager to talk about what went on. They are also seeking confirmation that they did well, or at least performed as the instructor or their peers expected. Discussions following any experience generate a great amount of feeling as

well as intellectual insights. Such ventilation is very important. An exercise without closure robs the student of real learning, frustrates the instructor, and cheats the course out of its richest dimension.